

Fly Away



BY SCOTT TIBBITTS

AT 1 A.M. THE PHONE RANG, WAKING MY WIFE AND ME. KARLA, WHOSE HUSBAND KURT WORKED FOR OUR COMPANY, EXPLAINED THAT KURT HAD NOT COME HOME FROM WORK THAT NIGHT. SHE WAS WORRIED, AND WANTED TO KNOW IF I HAD ANY IDEA WHERE HE MIGHT BE.

KURT WAS ONE OF THE LEAD ENGINEER/PROJECT MANAGERS at our company, Starsys, in Boulder, Colorado. I had hired Kurt six years ago and found him to be a man of few words but huge actions. Kurt had single-handedly created two new business areas in the company and made a significant contribution to the upcoming Mars Exploration Rover mission. Conscientious, inventive, quiet, caring, he was well liked by every person that he came in contact with. Kurt and Karla had two children, ages four and nine, and he was one of those fathers who had figured out that the important things in life center on family.

I told Karla I would call her back, and then called several other folks in the company. No one had seen Kurt

day, everyone quietly hoping and praying that this would turn out all right. Karla dropped off her four-year-old at Starsys before the police arrived at her house to get involved with the search.

The call came in at nine that morning that they had found the car at a trail head. I vividly remember what happened next. With the leadership team around the conference table, another call came from Karla with the words, "Kurt's gone. What am I going to do?"

While running in the mountains, Kurt had a fatal heart attack. An avid backcountry skier and climber, he was 45 years old and appeared in great health. I looked at the people in the room with me, and the tears came. While Jenny, our HR director, took Kurt's son home, I announced another all-hands meeting.

I stood in front of the room not knowing what I was going to say. I had always known that at some point I would have to deal with a death in our company. Since many of the folks are involved in risky activities such as climbing or motorcycle riding, I expected this would be the cause—not a heart attack. But here it was, and what was I supposed to say and do?

I spoke honestly from my heart, and from my own experience as a father. It was a struggle to get the words out through the tears. Starsys is a closely knit team of 100 people. I asked that the family be in our prayers, and that people do what they felt they needed to do during the day—whether that was going

home, or working, or just talking. Everyone headed back to their offices and the company settled into mourning for Kurt.

That day people started to ask what they could do to help the family. One of the engineers offered his home, and about twenty people got together that night to talk. Over the next couple days we set up a fund where people could contribute dollars or vacation time or comp time, and Starsys would translate that into equivalent dollars and provide a matching contribution. The contributions were astonishing. Several people offered up a week of upcoming vacation. Spontaneous and generous contributions also came in from the companies Kurt had worked with.

Other forms of support came in, as well—such as the letter that Michael Hecht from JPL wrote to Kurt's

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since lunch, and he had missed some important afternoon meetings. The operations manager drove back to work and checked Kurt's e-mails and the sign-out sheet. It looked as if Kurt had left for lunch, but then did not return.

It was now 2 a.m. There wasn't much more I could do before morning, but I decided that doing anything was better than just waiting. I hopped in my car and joined Karla driving around the area looking for Kurt's car. We checked in with each other every five minutes or so by cell phone. Neither of us could come up with a scenario that wasn't bad news. We nervously joked that maybe he had run off to Mexico, but knew that we were grasping at straws.

First thing the next morning our company had an all-hands meeting. I explained that Kurt was missing and that it did not look good. The company settled into the

children describing all the special things that their father had done for the Mars Program. With the letter, he sent a package with Mars memorabilia.

The company continued to grieve throughout the month. We left Kurt's desk space untouched for a while. When the time was right, Karla came in with the children after hours, packed up Kurt's belongings, and took them home. As it turned out Kurt was quiet about his accomplishments at work, and the family had little knowledge of the details. We wrote the children a letter that described all that he had done, and the things that he contributed to the space program.

Two weeks later we had an idea; the last program he was working on was Radarsat II. The Electronics Control Unit (ECU) had some space on it where a message could possibly be etched. We asked Karla if the children would like to put a message on the cover that would be going up to the heavens to circle the earth. When Karla said yes, we called Gary Heinemann, the Project Manager on Radarsat II, and asked if we could put a small message on the box. The call came back the next day. They had checked with MacDonald Dettwiler. Gary's words were emphatic, "You put a message on there and make it as big as you can!" Karla and the kids each wrote a personal message, which was then etched onto the cover of the ECU, visible on the spacecraft for all to see.

A month afterwards, Karla asked if the family could come to Starsys to say thank you. With the company in the meeting room, Karla talked about how hard the month had been and how thankful she was for the people of Starsys and what they had done. Then she explained that the children had a gift for us. Over the next 10 minutes they quietly walked up to each of us, said thank you, and handed us an origami crane that they had made. It was an emotional closure to a very rough month. Just about every office in the company still has one of the cranes in some special place as a reminder of Kurt.

So life continues. Karla and the kids remain connected to Starsys and come to the company parties and events. Since the loss, quite a few people have made a point of stopping me and expressing a different version of the same message: "I never understood what people meant when they said Starsys was a 'family.' Now I know."

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